



BILL

BY ROY NORTON

THERE were three of us, Tom, me, and Bill. Bill was the dog and the last to join.

The place of our coming together was in Alaska, away off up there where even nowadays there are but few white men, and where, at that time, all was covered over with the glamour of mystery and the splendid terror of the unknown.

We never knew where Bill came from, but, anyway, that was nobody's business, and in Alaska at that time there were lots of questions which no man ever asked another. Maybe Bill had done something for which, if there had been necessity, he would have changed his name; but we never thought so. As far as we ever knew, he was a thoroughbred gentleman, with all that the title implies, by birth and instinct. Certainly he was always on

the square with us, and we went through some pretty hard times together.

Tradition said that Bill first landed in Alaska, swimming with an unknown white man,—probably his partner,—and valiantly trying to assist him to the shore. The Indians at Katmai picked them from the smother of foam where the breakers sweep over shoals on one side and hammer themselves to spray against a tall cliff on the other.

The man lost his life, but Bill pulled through, and was finally dragged away, overpowered and resisting, into the interior, to become the property of the tyune, or chief, of Kolukuk. That 's where we first met him.

Tom and I had a hard time getting into Kolukuk. Had been out of grub for a day or two when we first sighted

the village, then unknown to white men, away over across an arm of the sea. This arm was frozen and covered with snow as we looked down upon it from a high, bleak embankment. At best, salt ice is pretty treacherous; but we were too desperate to wait to travel round the rim of this basin, so we unhooked the sled-rope and turned it loose. Down it went, smashing, bumping, and bounding out upon the border ice.

We followed with the dogs, slipping, sliding, and scrambling, until we, too, landed. Then we hooked them in again and started on this cold, white flat toward the peeping roofs of the igloos, where the smoke rose up as though anxious to get freed from it all.

Away out on the ice, a full mile from the village, and alone in stately solitude and filled with disgust for Alaska, sat Bill. We yelled at him, wondering who he was, and why he was out there by himself, and then, to our surprise, he arose to his feet and came to a fine point. Stood with head and tail stretched rigidly out and his right foreleg lifted for a moment as if he were posing for a statue. He was only waiting for another sound to make sure that we were white men.

We called again, using our hands to yell through, and that ended Bill's hesitancy or wait for introduction. The wind, with a handicap, could n't have caught him as he came to us. He stopped out in front, heedless of the snarling team and wanting to make quite sure that we were his sort. Then he lunged all over us, he was so glad to see his own kind of folk again.

"Well, what do you think of that? It's a white man's dog," said Tom.

Bill looked at him and understood. And right here, as we three met, we knew that we understood him. God fixes things so that some times it's possible for men and dogs to communicate with each other, and this was one of those times.

"I've had a devil of a time here in this strong-smelling Indian village," Bill said by way of conversation, "and am mighty glad you came along. I'm hungry to talk to, and be with, my own people again." It was there we named him Bill, first because that's a gentleman's name, and second because he looked like

a partner we once had down Arizona-way.

Then we drove hard toward the igloos, thinking that after all these months we were going to meet one human being that we could feel sure of; but it was a disappointment. There was n't any white man there, and most of the Indians had never seen one. They crowded around us in sullen, suspicious curiosity. We were n't popular.

The only reason we got into the kasima—that's a sort of club house—was because they thought we must be some kind of traders. And all the time while we stood outside, Bill stayed with us, showing his teeth to the village dogs, and occasionally trying to snap an Indian that came too near. How he did hate the whole lot!

We'd been in some pretty rank Indian villages, but this one beat them all. The natives were very poor, very unfriendly, and, worst of all, very dirty. We crawled through the usual tunnel, fighting our way with any dogs we met in the darkness, and up into an underground burrow. Bill started after us, but the tyne raised such a yell that we did n't take Bill's part, because we did n't want to make the chief too hostile. So Bill went back and crawled on our sled, being anxious to stay with something civilized.

Outside, the night came down, a wind raged and tore loose chunks of ice and floating snow from the silent whiteness, and we were mighty glad to be sheltered, even in such a hole as this. It was a big place, lighted only by the flare of the fire from the pit in the center of the dirt floor, with no opening except the door to the tunnel and a little hole in the roof covered over with sewn bladders.

In this stifling nest were crowded about fifty bucks, squaws, and papooses, and, to add to the general bad odor, bladders of seal oil, strings of dried fish, and chunks of rancid blubber jostled one another from the ridge-poles and fought to see which could smell the loudest. They were n't a pretty lot, these Indians, in the silence and the darkness, with the flash of light occasionally shining up against their straight, matted hair and ugly cheekbones. To make any sort of peace we had to pass around a little tea, which they took readily, and in return gave grudging

toleration. They knew we hated them, and we knew they hated us, from the jump-off.

Tom and I drew cuts to see which one should sleep next to the wall, and Tom won. He always was a lucky cuss. The tyune took the place of honor next me, or else got there because he hoped to steal something before the night was over. He was a squat, villainous-looking old buck, wrinkled around the eyes and adorned with sparse whiskers which looked as if they might have been stolen from some careless porcupine. They just added to his general shagginess.

Along in the night I woke up with something blowing noisily and warmly against the back of my neck. The fire in the pit had died down to coals, so it was dark. I reached out and took a feel at this thing. It was the tyune's face, where he had worked himself under my robe, the air having cooled off a bit. I carefully raised my foot till it was firmly planted in his paunch, and with a good brace against Tom, kicked. He landed about ten feet out.

There were wails, and shrieks, and shouts, and, above all, savage growls and barks. Bill was there, and had got pretty busy. Just as a buck threw a pitch knot on the coals in the pit and the flames began hurrying upward, Tom and I got to our feet. Down on the ground was the tyune, with Bill trying to gnaw a hole in him.

We yelled at the dog, and he backed off with a jump and landed between Tom and me. By this time we were with our backs against the wall, and pistols in hand, wondering what was going to hit first.

It was n't a very comforting picture that came when the light grew strong. There we three stood,—Tom, Bill, and me,—Bill snarling and with every hair on his silky back at a stand, and a bunch of mad savages drawn round us in a semicircle. The fire in its flickering showed just how sore they were, and made pretty prominent the spears they held. They did n't need paint to go to war right then. They were all ready.

The tyune blamed it all on Bill. In a gentle patois, composed of Russian, Chinook, and Siwash, he explained that Bill always had been a devil, and, before

his voice broke off in a grunt, promised to eat Bill's heart. I guess he would have prepared him for that expiatory ceremony right then if we had backed ground. Between growls, Bill heard him and actually looked up at me and grinned with joy—a kind of unholy "got-him-that-time" look.

It cost us ten minutes' powwow, which was cheap, and a pound of tobacco, which was expensive, to get peace in the family, and then we had time to look around. Bill had been so hungry to associate with white men that he had dug a tunnel and eaten clean through a wood door to enjoy our society. But when the kasima grew quiet again, you may be sure Bill went to sleep between Tom's feet and mine. Neither Tom nor I wanted to take a chance, because Bill gave us to understand that the tyune would murder him if we did n't stand pat. So we stood.

And that's about the pleasant sort of time we had for the next couple of days till the storm let up and we hired a guide and got ready to tackle the pass beyond the village. Naturally we had many quiet talks together, Tom, and me, and Bill.

Bill said as plain as could be, "You fellows are n't going to leave a thoroughbred like me here in this hole, are you?" And we had come to an agreement we would n't.

Well, we offered the tyune everything from a jews'-harp to a dog for Bill, but he just would n't let go. For three hours we tried to *kaboosak*,—that means trade,—but it was no use. So we decided to run a bluff, and slid out of the igloos and over the snow toward the mountains. We never got a chance to run it, though.

Before we had gone a mile, and that, too, with Bill's entreaties and pleadings ringing out in the cold air all the time, we heard a commotion back of us. There came Bill, and he was coming, too; don't mistake. He had chewed the thongs with which the tyune, after blanketing his head with a pelt, had bound him, and was running so hard that his belly was n't more than six inches from the snow crust.

Bill was n't saying anything, but about the whole village, led by the tyune, was. Pretty soon the tyune dragged out one of those old Hudson Bay blunderbusses and turned loose a couple of shots at him. No

more, though, because those slugs which the benevolent H. B. used to trade cost a nickel each, and that makes gunning expensive.

I forgot to say that Tom and me had the finest dog team that was ever brought together in the Arctic. Anyhow, I think so. Had them trained so that with a "*Yip-yip*" they would break into a dead run. When we saw that mob coming after Bill, we made a jump for the sled, did the tallest "*yip-yipping*" we had ever done, and were off in a cloud of snowdust. The guide had stopped, and when we caught up with him, did n't want to join the party. But we needed his advice, so stopped the dogs long enough to take him on—about as you would a sack of salt.

We looked back. The tyune, being a little overfed and out of practice, had dropped behind, but there was one big buck pelting along that looked fit to run a week without a let-up. Evidently the whole village had their bets on him, but Bill was distancing him at every jump.

We went at least three miles this way before an accident happened to Bill. The long, loose ends of the thong caught round a snag sticking through the snow, he did a great somersault in the air, and found himself a prisoner. Lord! how he did yell at us!

"Can't you see I 'm tangled?" he called over and over again. That 's the only time I ever heard him cry as if in hopelessness. We halted the sled, and I went back, resolved to stop the runner with a gun, if necessary. Just as I got Bill loose and was accepting his thanks, I heard a noise on the sled ahead, and Tom and the guide were having it.

The guide was n't inclined to guide. Wanted to go back to his igloo, and howled all sorts of gibberish because we wanted to take Bill along. Tom expostulated with him, using his fist. Tom 's no slouch.

I, too, had business. I dropped on my knee, to get good aim, and took a wing-shot at the runner. He was out of range, but there came a little spurt of snow about ten feet ahead of him and that discouraged him. I did n't have to shoot again, although Bill wanted me to. The native stopped real quick, shook his fists, and made medicine to the gods to do all

sorts of things to us, and started back to his family.

That was the first time, so far as I know, that Tom or I ever stole anything. And we never have been sorry. But after that, night and day, we had to watch that guide.

Talk about Chilkoot Pass, made famous by the struggles of Boston boot-and-shoe clerks to get to Klondike; it 's nothing but a summer outing for the Amalgamated Ladies and Gentlemen's Heroic Mountain Climbing and Geographical Society compared with the one we went over.

It 's a kind of funnel-shaped thing, about twenty miles long, and if you 're fool enough to tackle it, you wait outside till there are no snow whirls around the peaks and the day is still; then you dash madly into this funnel, and hope you are going to get through the spout end before the wind comes up. If Old Boreas comes up, you try to back out; failing in this, you die. Then you quit trying.

Now, there 's a place in this pass where, after you 've crawled up, and up, and up, along a steep slope, you swing around a mountain's edge and find yourself with nothing but a narrow ledge to work over for five or six hundred feet. Fierce place that! Just a little sloping shelf, and if you happen inadvertently to drop off, there won't be anything to distract your attention for quite a while.

The guide's feet slipped and for about a minute he wallowed around on his ugly face and tried to scratch holes in the ice with his fingers and toes. If he 'd been given ice-picks he might have done better. I did n't have time to watch him drop, although it would have been interesting. I was too busy.

The dogs backed up, the sled lost way, and then commenced to sheer off to follow the guide. There was n't anything for me to do but try to hold it with my body. I threw myself flat down on the crust. I stopped the sled all right, but it began to look as though I, too, would go over, when all of a sudden something grabbed me from the uphill side; there was a scratching of claws gripping into the ice, and Bill was dragging me back for all he was worth.

You know how just a little help sometimes makes things easy? Well, that 's

what Bill did for me. He had n't been very particular, not having much time to choose holds, and had set his teeth pretty well into my hip. He was glad and at the same time apologetic until I just sat down, with my back to the wall, gathered his head up against my breast, and thanked him for the good turn. And all that time Tom, who had come back from away up ahead, stood there saying over and over, "Well, I'll be ——!"

Then we went ahead, and being pretty well through the pass, did n't miss the guide much. I rather think Bill was glad he went overboard.

In the wild places where a man's free there are trips and trips, but this was a bad one, with villages far between,—hundreds of miles,—and many of them starving, the caribou having run north that winter. It was always on and on, the snow soft at times, till you wore your heart out tugging at your sled-ropes and swore at the balls that clogged the web when your shoes settled deeply. Then would come the cold days when traveling was good, but you suffered in other ways.

Back of the sled were bloody prints on the snow where Bill walked. A blanket kept the chill from cutting through his silky hide, but nature had n't made his feet for the North. The wolves and dogs and other wild things up there, even to the rabbits, have big splay feet covered with hair around the pads—kind of a natural snow-shoe. Those dogs know how to care for themselves, but it was hard on Bill. It was a new game to him. He used to come limping to me, hold up a paw, and say: "Get a little of that ice out of there, won't you, pal? It hurts some." We made moccasins for him, but they did n't do much good.

So we took to hauling him on the sled, although he protested, and let me know that he felt himself something of a nuisance. But he never lost heart nor complained, and on nights when timber wolves prowled round and round the camp, trying to bring down a dog, would have willingly taken a chance and ended his life in one splendid fight, fang to fang and sinew to sinew. He never fought with the team. He was too dignified, and merely tolerated the other dogs as beasts of burden. And they seemed to

realize that in his way he was a king. Intelligence is always commanding.

Half-rations for the dogs and our grub gone; moldy dog fish for ourselves and quarter rations for the dogs; then no rations at all; hunger shrieking in the wind, and the weakened team down until it could barely drag the almost empty sled; the tent and stove abandoned, and an unknown trail ahead—that's what we came to.

In a starving camp, surrounded by staggering, footsore, skeleton dogs, one night we came to the last resort and resolved to begin the following day by the sacrifice of a dog, and so on each day, until we could reach somewhere out over the whiteness and find food. But it did n't come to that, because on that very night Bill, with his finely trained nose, again saved the situation.

Out back of the camp-fire he unearthed from beneath the snow an abandoned cache of fish, years old, but better, much better, than starvation. And he called to us to come as the famished pack hurled itself upon him. Heaven! how we fought, we men and dogs! And when they were beaten back, Tom had his legs torn to the muscles, I had my share, and from under the lot we took out staunch old Bill, still silent, and uncomplaining, and victorious.

The find saved our lives, but always after that Bill was a cripple. In the battle some one of the pack had ripped the shoulder tendons of one of his legs, and sent him limping through life.

He was in better shape when we reached a village, the most prosperous one on the coast, and made ready to take the next and hardest jump. At this place we found a half-breed missionary, a fine old chap, doing all the good he could for his people and living there year in and year out, patiently earning his way to a white man's heaven. He was a good man, I know, because Bill forgave that half strain of Indian blood and took to him.

The way ahead was so hard and unknown that we decided to leave Bill there with the missionary to recuperate till spring, when we could send round the coast and have him brought to us. But it was a mighty hard thing to do, and I'm not ashamed to say that Tom and I were all broken up. I told Bill, but for once he did n't seem to understand, or else took

it as a joke. I sha'n't forget my last day with him. There were a few ptarmigan around there, and Bill and I played truant like a pair of boys together and went hunting. Bill was happier than I had ever seen him before. And he knew more at that game than I did. He worked very hard, though, and was tired the next morning when we put the rested pack into the harness and prepared to go.

Bill limped up to the sled, and I never saw any one so badly hurt as he was when I said: "Bill, you are n't going any farther this trip. You're going to stay here, where you can rest and get strong, until spring."

I could n't look into his eyes, because he said: "What have I done? Have n't I always tried to do the square thing? Are n't we pardners? Did I ever show the white feather?"

It had to be done, though, so I took him into a log hut, hugged him, and told him "Good-by," and we pulled out. From behind us came the long wails of one cruelly deserted, and mourning a farewell.

There is n't much more to this story; all our lonesomeness in the separation, and the weariness and suffering of the trip which nearly ended our lives, does n't count. We did well that early spring, and when the ice was gone, Tom worked the claim alone while I went back in a little coaster to bring Bill. But he's there yet.

After we left him behind, he grew moody, and always yearned for us. He passed his days in running to the tops of the little hills and watching, always watching, for some one who never came. He retained his dignity, and gently, but without reciprocating, accepted any courtesies shown him by the missionary, who loved and understood and pitied him. Dog and half-breed, both were gentlemen.

There came a night when the ice had gone out and some fishermen came in a smack—came in while the night was cruel, the waves ripping across the shoals, and the skies wildly heavy with the tearing storm. The Indians huddled on the beach in powerlessness when the smack went down, and the dogs of the village, blindly aware of the tragedy of the sea before them, stretched hairy throats heavenward and wailed the Malmoot song of the dying—all the dogs but Bill.

In silent sorrow he limped backward and forward, until from out the half-darkness came a call in the speech he knew: "Help! Help! For God's sake, help!"

In the ghastly flare of the night, from where he stood he saw a man, a white man, clinging to a piece of drift and lifted on the crest of the waves. It was one of his own people, and he knew it. I can fancy brave old Bill, in splendid valor, saying to himself: "I'm deserted by my friends, and not much good; I don't like the water, and I'm a cripple: but, anyway, I'll make a try."

That was the end. When the sea beat the bank sullenly on the next gloomy morning, it chucked, with savage derision, two things on the beach—the body of a man with widely staring eyes and clenched fingers, and that of a crippled pointer dog whose teeth had been so firmly set in the man's flannel shirt that natives had to tear the garments of the dead to bring separation.

Once, so a Britisher told me, there was a man named Byron who wrote an epitaph for a dog and put up a monument. I'm sure our monument is bigger. It stands out there over that bleak point when the snows are everywhere, or in summer-time looks accusingly at the sea. It says:

"NOT TO A DOG; BUT TO OUR PARDNER BILL."

